

THE LESBIAN  
AND GAY  
NEWS  
MAGAZINE  
NO. 83

# OUTWEEK

\$2.95 USA \$1.95 in NYC

# GAYS and the QUILF CRISIS

*special reports by*

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garnered praise from Sinclair Lewis. When in 1927 *The Grandmothers* received the Harper Prize Novel Award, Wescott's reputation was made. In fact, so jealous was Hemingway over the reception of this book that he panned it, saying, "Every word was written with the intention of making Glenway Wescott immortal." Wescott went on to write a handful of very significant books, including *The Pilgrim Hawk* and *Apartment in Athens*, yet the sort of stature conferred on his peers always eluded him.

The published fiction of Wescott does not deal much with overt sexuality, although suggestions of a gay sensibility surface here and there, particularly in *The Grandmothers* and *The Pilgrim Hawk*. All of Wescott's thoughts about homosexuality and intimate details of his active sex life, however, have been made public between the covers of these published journals. The entries run the gamut from juicy gossip to ruminations on politics, music and family matters to descriptions of nature to revelations about the author's work and his thoughts on writing and publishing. Most of the entries are brief—the reader is confronted with an ever-changing kaleidoscopic view of subjects and observations—and the entire journal is written with precision and elegance. These are not thoughtless, random scribbles but carefully composed paragraphs that display the same artistry as the author's fiction and essays.

Wescott knew most of the major literary and artistic figures of the day, and he has many priceless anecdotes to relate. Included in Wescott's circle of acquaintances were Paul Cadmus, George Platt Lynes, Pavel Tchelitchew, Katherine Anne Porter, Janet Flanner, W. Somerset Maugham, Thornton Wilder, Christopher Isherwood, the Sitwells and Alfred Kinsey, and the many insightful portrayals engender memorable remarks. Of Maugham, for example, Wescott writes: "His lack of talent is so basic, it must be in the very cerebral tissue like ophthalmic migraine. There

is something minutely wrong with not only every sentence, but every idea, something one is half-ashamed of minding, something in the nature of mispunctuation or misspelling." But Wescott's world was a complex and constantly evolving one. Throughout the journals, Wescott's thoughts about Maugham veer from admiration to scorn. When it came to certain figures, like Jean Genêt, he was, however, unyielding: "My principal objection of Genêt: Within the framework of his works of fiction, he makes too many references to their being fictitious." And he deals quite candidly with privileged information, as in this gem on Katherine Anne Porter: "I think she should never speak her mind of people she dislikes or of whom she feels resentful. Then her malice is not for fun, it is an expression of self-pity. Her attitude toward homosexual writers—Gide, Maugham, even Forster—becomes an expression of her (deadly) lonesomeness..."

There is precious little information about the sex lives of pre-Stonewall gay literary figures, and, fortunately, Wescott is very free regarding his own. He writes in depth about his lovers, offers titillating tidbits about certain sexual encounters and waxes poetic about the genitalia of George Platt Lynes:

"Lovely, peculiar color, colors, of George's sex in bright sunlight: half its length is very tawny, even sallow. Then on the tissue laid bare by circumcision (delayed until his late adolescence), there are little odd markings, like faded bloodstains, and others like stains of grape. The glans is a gray sort of pink, softly freckled, and its flange or corona vivid pink. Under which the scrotal skin, too delicate and lax and weighted, has a cold bloom and silveriness of wrinkles."

The phrase, "continual lessons," is Whitman's, an American writer with whom Wescott has much in common. Both were deeply influenced by Americana, but both yearned for ideals and degrees of freedom that America cannot satisfy. They transcended their immediate surroundings and wrote about the world with knowledge of greater potentials and grander designs. Both led actively homosexual lives and left behind writing that attests to the strength and durability of gay love. With the publication of his journals and the reissue of *The Pilgrim Hawk* (by Farrar, Straus & Giroux, this month), Wescott's stature in the pantheon of American letters will be reaffirmed, and his contribution to gay life and culture established finally for all the world to see. ▼

## Risking Resistance

INVENTING AIDS by Cindy Patton. Routledge. \$42.50 cl. \$13.95 pb. 160 pp.

*We advocate that everyone who is at risk get tested.*

—Terry Beswick, Project Inform  
(quoted in *Au Courant*,  
Dec. 24, 1990)

by Max Cavitch

Knowledge of one's HIV-antibody status has always been understood in terms of responsibility—principally the gay community's responsibility to contain the virus within its

expendable ranks, the responsibility of the HIV-positive to protect the "general public" from infection (preferably by dying quickly, but in the meantime by identifying their doomed selves as a threat to the health of others). With increasing evidence of AZT's apparent medical benefits for asymptomatic HIV-positive people, however, has come the message (from the medical establishment, from AIDS service organizations, from activists) that getting tested is now the best way of taking responsibility for oneself.

# BOOKS

Cindy Patton is not out to discourage anyone from getting tested, but rather to encourage all of us to place less faith in the notion that there can be a simple, scientific response to this epidemic that ignores the social repressions that make it a true crisis.

The presumption used to be that knowing one's HIV antibody status would help in making decisions about sex and recreational drug use. Now, the supervening presumption is that it will help in making decisions about treatment.

It's hard—perhaps irresponsible—to question the advocacy of testing for “everyone who is at risk” in light of the lifesaving potential of early treatment. Yet, as Cindy Patton demonstrates in *Inventing AIDS*, what “the test” is able to establish often can't compare with what it encourages us to ignore. Without pausing even to consider the unreliability (and thus potential lethality) of current testing technology, it's clear that the anxious enforcement of the categories “positive” and “negative” has the lethal effect of reinforcing what Patton calls “the stigma and patterns of discrimination already insinuated into AIDS risk logic.” Risk behavior is still so closely linked in the public mind with gay men, prostitutes, drug users and people of color that seropositivity acts more as a confirmation of one's membership in those communities least likely to be valued or listened to. Advocating testing for “everyone who is at risk” still means advocating for those who, regardless of their serostatus, already run the risks of gross *mistreatment*.

Cindy Patton is not out to discourage anyone from getting tested, but rather to encourage all of us to place less faith in the notion that there can be a simple, scientific response to this epidemic that ignores the social repressions that make it a true crisis. These repressions occur, Patton argues, not merely because George Bush favors genocide over education, but because AIDS is a phenomenon around which reaction and resistance to a staggering array of power relations assume a heightened significance for our entire culture—indeed, for the global community. Paula Treichler has spoken of the “epidemic of signification” engendered by the AIDS crisis. Cindy Patton, along with Treichler and other cultural analysts like Simon Watney, has been brilliantly successful at helping us explore the etiology, symptomatology and possible treat-

ments for this other “epidemic” by unpacking the significance of the words we use (and are told to use) when speaking about AIDS.

“The test,” “risk,” “community,” “health,” “public,” “science” and “knowledge” are just some of the terms that Patton would like us to be skeptical about, for the simple reason that they are made to mean very different things in different contexts. Who decides, for example, whether “healthy” means antibody-negative or asymptomatic? What is the difference between a “risk group” and a “community”? Where does the “general public” end and all the rest of us begin? Such terms structure our experience of AIDS; they help determine who gets attention and who doesn't.

*Inventing AIDS* is not simply a glossary of dangerous terms marked “handle with care.” Patton knows that she can't inoculate her readers against the virulent effects of language any more than she can quarantine particular words. What she does do with impressive clarity and sophistication is to show how in a variety of contexts (coalition politics, medical literature, the classroom, international AIDS work, minority activism), the way we speak about HIV and AIDS can and must be less complacent, more critical and thus more likely to disrupt the power relations that continue to silence, marginalize and punish. Patton's work is critical in many senses, but most of all because it helps locate points of possible transition and change, not just in the deadly progress of a single virus but also in the juggernaut of social repression that has accompanied it.

The test, says Patton, “is a series of events, not a moment of transcendently assessing truth.” Ultimately, the results of testing pose a range of questions without definitely answering them: questions about treatment, certainly, but also about education, about counseling, about community awareness and action, about individual lives and how they can be lived with a minimum of suffering and a maximum of dignity. *Inventing AIDS* insists that we not stop short of addressing these questions. Don't risk not reading it. ▼

**BOOKS**

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